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SPY SUSPECT
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WASHINGTON

Edward L. Howard refused to transfer to Moscow for the CIA and was fired by the U.S. spy agency, all at about the same time he began working for the Soviet KGB, U.S. authorities say.

U.S. officials said Thursday they believe the fugitive former CIA clandestine agent started working for the Soviet spy agency because he was angry over being assigned to Moscow.

An FBI affidavit in federal court in New Mexico showed that Howard learned of the bureau's interest in him when agents interviewed him directly on Sept. 20, the day he abruptly quit his job before fleeing.

Government officials familiar with the case were willing to discuss it only on grounds that they not be identified.

Meanwhile, The New York Times, citing congressional sources it did not identify, said today that Howard is believed to have given the Soviet Union secret information about how the United States gathers intelligence information in Moscow.

And CBS News on Thursday quoted Sen. Dave Durenberger, chairman of the Senate Committee on Intelligence, as saying that Howard might have given the Soviets information on U.S. intelligence gathering. Durenberg, R-Minn., said the security breach caused by Howard could be "as serious as anything this country has seen in the past," according to CBS.

Howard, 33, went to work for the CIA's clandestine service in January 1981 and was fired by the agency in June 1983, according to U.S. officials who were uncertain as to the reason for his dismissal.

Howard told co-workers when he returned to his native New Mexico in July 1983 that he had just turned down a government assignment to Moscow. That refusal might have prompted a firing, but two sources indicated Howard had failed a CIA-administered polygraph.

The CIA tests prospective, current and departing employees on the polygraph for security breaches, and in some but not all circumstances, a failure can lead to an employee's firing. The test is intended to cover a wide range of subjects, from espionage to simple negligence with secret information.

One intelligence source has said there is no evidence Howard worked for the Soviets before he left the CIA, but other sources have suggested he hooked up with the Soviets very shortly before he left CIA.

Either case would be less damaging than if Howard had worked inside CIA for some time under the actual direction of the Soviets.

Asked what motivated Howard to work for the Soviets, one official said Thursday, "He was ticked off over his assignment to Moscow. That's why he went over to the other side."

Curtis Porter, who hired Howard in July 1983 as an economic analyst for the New Mexico legislature's finance committee, said, "He said he was going to be posted to Moscow and wouldn't want to raise his kid there. ... He never went." Howard's son, Lee, is now 2.

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Porter said Howard claimed to have worked for the State Department in Washington. The State Department job was Howard's cover while at CIA.

One former top-level U.S. counterintelligence official said it was surprising that a young agent would refuse a Moscow assignment even with a small child.

"A young agent can't expect to get London or Paris. Besides, Moscow is sort of a plum in terms of one's career, and there are worse foreign outposts," the former counterspy said. "However, if the agent were already working for the Soviets, he might be worried that they would press him to do so many things in Moscow that he would get caught."

Howard was charged by the FBI on Sept. 23 with conspiring to transmit national defense information to a foreign power. FBI agents have been trying to arrest him since then but he has been missing from his home in Santa Fe, N.M. since Sept. 22.

Vitaly Yurchenko, a ranking KGB official who defected this summer in Rome, has told American authorities that two ex-CIA agents went to work for the Soviets, and one official says Howard probably is one of them.

At the State Department, spokesman Charles Redman said Howard never worked for the department or the U.S. Embassy in Moscow. A department official said Howard's planned transfer was entered into the records for his cover job at State and the records never were corrected because of an oversight.

Meanwhile, a minor flap developed inside the Justice Department over Howard's success in eluding FBI agents.

One department source said Justice officials felt the FBI agents had bungled the effort to keep track of Howard, but a federal law enforcement source said the agents did all they could before an arrest warrant was obtained.

The department source said agents went to his home while he was out before he fled, and his wife let them conduct an informal look around the house. An FBI affidavit filed in federal court in Albuquerque said FBI agents interviewed Howard himself on Sept. 20 and said the FBI "believes that after Howard's interview with the FBI and his speculation that he would be charged with a federal violation, he fled sometime during the evening of Sept. 21."

Howard abruptly left work on Sept. 20, leaving behind a typed resignation note.

This source said FBI agents were still watching the house when Howard slipped away, apparently overnight on Sept. 21. He is thought to have flown from Albuquerque, 60 miles away, to Dallas on the afternoon of Sept. 22.

But a federal law enforcement source said the agents were not there to keep constant watch on Howard. "Their purpose was to find out where he lived, how many members were in his family, when he normally left and came home, and any other habits that might assist them later if they came back for an arrest," this source said.

"It's often necessary to contact even the subject or their relatives directly to get probable cause for an arrest, and that was necessary in this case," the law enforcement source said.

"The agents had no arrest warrant, and he could have told them to get lost," he continued. "Sure, it would have been nicer if he didn't leave on a moonless night, but he is a trained agent."

On that Saturday night in Santa Fe, there was a half-moon, but there were clouds.